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Iranian Jewish Leader Criticizes Katsav Comments

A report that Israel's President Moshe Katsav chided Iranian Jews for settling in Los Angeles rather than in Israel has been criticized by a leader of the local Iranian Jewish community.

The Jerusalem Post reported last week that Katsav had told a group of Iranian Jews from various countries that nothing could justify exchanging one Diaspora for another and that it was inconceivable that both South African and Iranian Jews had opted to live in countries other than Israel.

During the meeting, the Israeli president, himself a native of Iran, had an exchange with Dr. Heshmat Kermanshahchi, the Los Angeles delegate to the meeting, on the reasons why the latter had decided to live in Southern California.

Katsav expressed his concern that the Iranian Jewish community in Los Angeles, the largest in the Diaspora, would become totally assimilated within one or two generations, according to the Jerusalem Post.

However, Sam Kermanian, secretary-general of the Iranian American Jewish Federation here, while acknowledging Katsav's expressed concern, said that the meeting in Jerusalem required some context.

Katsav's remarks came during a day-long seminar, which focused on preserving the history of Iranian Jewry, one of the world's oldest Diaspora communities. Kermanian said that, in general, the Israeli president had warmly praised the achievements of Iranian Jews in Israel and other nations.

Kermanian also cited some current statistics: Today, some 250,000 Jews of Iranian descent live in Israel, 50,000 in the United States, a small number in Europe and 25,000 remain in Iran, out of a prerevolution total of 100,000.

That means that 10 out of every 13 Jews of Iranian descent live in Israel, according to Kermanian, among them Israel's president, defense minister and deputy chief of staff.

"Having been freed from the ghetto a mere generation ago, Iranian Jews are extremely proud of their collective accomplishments," concluded Kermanian. — Tom Tugend, Contributing Editor

Hawaii Governor Visits Southland

Hawaii Gov. Linda Lingle is stopping in Los Angeles this week before embarking on a six-day trip to Israel. The visit to the Jewish state will be the governor's first.

Lingle, a Jewish Republican, accepted the Golda Meir Award at a State of Israel Bonds luncheon on Thursday at the Four Seasons, and CSUN will present the governor with a distinguished alumni award at a Saturday dinner. Lingle graduated cum laude from the university with a journalism degree in 1975.

Lingle's visit to Israel follows similar missions by other governors — including California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, New York Gov. George Pataki and Colorado Gov. Bill Owens — to promote business opportunities and economic cooperation. Lingle and a 27-person state delegation will travel May 17-22, a trip planned by the Israel Consul General in Los Angeles.

"We are very excited about the potential results from this trip and the partnerships our departments can form with their Israeli counterparts," Lingle said.

Born in St. Louis, Mo., Lingle moved with her family to Southern California when she was 12. She relocated to Hawaii after graduating from CSUN. Lingle was elected in 2002 and is Hawaii's first Jewish and first female governor. — Adam Wills, Associate Editor

Israeli-Ethiopian Terror Victim Visits L.A.

Elad Wassa, the Israeli Ethiopian terror victim who found himself in newspapers all over the world last year when he stammered "You are my hero" to Christopher Reeve during Reeve's visit to Israel, visited Los Angeles last week at the invitation of Rick Fishbein and Stephen S. Wise Temple.

Wassa, 26, was paralyzed from the waist down in 2002 after a bomb exploded at the Netanya market he was working at. He was "adopted" by Stephen S. Wise Temple through the Israel Emergency Solidarity-One Family Fund, which matches up families of terror victims with supportive communities in the Diaspora.

The temple gave Wassa and his sister, Gila, a Los Angeles experience, including courtside tickets to a Lakers playoff game, a trip to Universal Studios and a shopping spree at a Westfield mall. Wassa was honored at the Stephen S. Wise's Yom HaAtzmaut ceremony and was a guest at Young Israel of Century City and at a



dinner that Milken's senior class made for Leor Baron, a terror victim the class sponsored.

While in Los Angeles, Wassa also met with Dr. Susan Harkema of the UCLA Locomotion Research Center. Harkema was instrumental in researching a treadmill therapy for use in treating spinal chord injury. Reeve used this therapy when he visited Los Angeles, and it is a therapy that has resulted in enabling paralyzed people to stand at the end of treatment. Wassa was placed on a list of potential candidates to receive treatment at the center.

Wassa said that America was "Mamash, metzuyan" (bona-fide, excellent), and that he was impressed with the amount of respect that America offers to its disabled residents.

"I'm able to see from up close who the people are who are helping me, and I can begin to understand the connection the community has with Israel," Wassa said. "It is really remarkable how deep the connection [the community has] here to Judaism and to Israel. — Gaby Wenig, Staff Writer

Genealogy Head Spotlights Poland's Hidden Jews

The Rev. Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel often wondered why he didn't look like his Catholic parents while growing up in eastern Poland. When he turned 35, the woman he'd known as his mother, Emilia, revealed she'd taken him from the Swieciany Ghetto at the behest of his birth mother, a woman known as Batia, to save him from the Holocaust. After the fall of communism, Weksler-Waszkinel began a search for family survivors that took him to Israel.

Yale Reisner, director of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation Genealogy Project at the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, will discuss how genealogy can aid hidden Polish Jews like Weksler-Waszkinel in a program titled "Raising Atlantis: The Recovery of Jewish Memory in Poland," part of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Los Angeles' 25th anniversary program at the Skirball Cultural Center on May 17.

Reisner's Genealogy Project has spent 15 years indexing records thought destroyed by Nazis and long-forgotten in storehouses by Communists. The documents help Polish Jews and Diaspora Jews of Polish descent find lost family or develop a better understanding of their own family histories, which various governments had denied them for most of the 20th century. And since Jews accounted for 10 percent of Poland's prewar population, the work and demand for the information is substantial.

"Since a significant portion of world Jewry comes from Poland ... there's really a tremendous interest in finding information," said Reisner, who fields hundreds of inquiries a month.

"Very often the one who discovers this is a Holocaust child who now is a grandparent. ... It's a shock wave that travels throughout the family," he said.

Reisner said that people's lives change significantly after such a discovery. "There are those who have returned to a full-fledged observant Jewish lifestyle," he said.

For Weksler-Waszkine the discovery has led him to adopt an advocacy role regarding Jewish issues in Poland. He wears a Star of David pendant with a cross inside, remaining loyal to his church vows and honoring both his Catholic and Jewish families.

"He now sees himself as being part of the Jewish people," Reisner said.

The Jewish Genealogical Society of Los Angeles will meet Monday, May 17, 7:30 p.m. at the Skirball Cultural Center, 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles. \$5. For more information, visit www.jgsla.org . — AW

Teens Get Gift From Blue and White

The Blue and White Fund, one of the nation's first mutual funds invested exclusively in Israeli companies, is making an offer that is hard to refuse.

The Los Angeles-based fund will give, for free, Blue and White shares worth \$18 to American boys and girls getting bar and bat mitzvah or confirmed. Friends and relatives can also order free certificates as presents for their loved ones celebrating those special days.

Blue and White Chief Executive Shlomo Eplboim said his firm is giving away the shares because he hopes to deepen young Americans' connection to Israel and to turn them into long-term investors.

"I want to make a link that it's sexy for young people to love Israel, that Israel is them," he said.

Eplboim said Blue and White expects the promotion to cost up to \$30,000 per month. Despite the high price, he said he thought the giveaways would ultimately generate more new business than spending the same amount on traditional public relations.

In Judaism, the number 18 symbolizes the Hebrew word chai (chet=8, yud=10), which means life, Eplboim said. Israelis often give bar mitzvah and wedding presents in multiples of 18, he added.

Blue and White posted more than a 40 percent return last year, making it among the strongest performing international funds based in the United States, Eplboim said. The mutual fund holds shares in myriad Israeli firms, ranging from generic drug-maker Teva Pharmaceuticals to technology giant Checkpoint.

Those interested in obtaining free Blue and White certificates can call the company at (877) 429-3863, or visit www.blueandwhitefund.com . — Marc Ballon, Senior Writer

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